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## THE DANGERS OF EARLY SCHOOLING

THE IDEA THAT "the earlier a child starts school the better" is well on the way to becoming an unquestioned tenet of the conventional wisdom. Educators and legislators across the country are pressing for earlier and earlier schooling for *all* children, on the assumption that schools and teachers can do more for the child than parents can or will do. Parents themselves, bewildered over how best to meet their children's needs, not only have accepted this formulation but have agitated to be certain *their* children will not be left behind in the race to the schoolhouse.

In the face of this growing movement—and after exhaustive review of the research concerning early-childhood education—we contend that sending four-year-olds off to school results in far more harm than good. In fact, we argue that children probably shouldn't attend school until they are seven or eight years old.

There is simply no conclusive proof that even the best known early-schooling plans are working, and there is considerable evidence that most are not. Studies show that most of the extensive projects such as Head Start and Great Cities have failed to produce the expected growth in scholastic achievement. Furthermore, there is an impressive body of research indicating that the late starter generally does better through school than the child who starts early.

It may be that the sheer volume of professional and political propaganda—along with parental complacency and uncertainty—will sweep all four-year-olds into school regardless of what the facts are. Already there is considerable momentum: the National Education Association's Educational Policies Commission has called for public-supported education beginning with four-year-olds; the New York State Regents have recommended generalized schooling down to age three, to be achieved by 1973 or 1975; and California's state school superintendent is currently seeking legislation to authorize schooling for all four-year-olds. While the price to the taxpayer for such programs would

be high, the costs could be even greater in damage to the very children who are supposedly being helped.

Most plans for early-childhood education seem to grow out of a genuine concern for children. The high caliber of people historically appointed to the Educational Policies Commission, for example, would suggest that only the highest motives stand behind its conclusions. Yet some of the older hands fear that many educators and media firms are moving rapidly into the field because, in the words of a key researcher, "that's where the money is."

Even the National School Public Relations Association might be forgiven for placing the movement for early-childhood education in a highly favorable light in its recent report, *Project Breakthrough*. Yet these leaders should be expected to provide hard evidence for their conclusions and recommendations, lest it be suggested their interest lies more in creating teacher jobs and government projects than in assuring the welfare of the child and his family. Indeed, one California state staffer expressed concern about teacher employment if research pointed away from early schooling.

Advocates of early schooling usually start from two well-proved points: the fact of incredibly rapid growth in the child's intelligence between birth and age five, and the need for the child's social development to keep pace with his intellectual maturity. But then they go on to make unfortunate twin assumptions: that a child's intelligence can be nurtured by organizing it, and that brightness means readiness for the world of schooling. In short, their happy vision is that early schooling offers the best garden for a child's budding intelligence and developing social awareness.

These assumptions, however comforting or promising, are contradicted by clear-cut experimental evidence. A wealth of research has established that one of a child's primary needs in these formative years is for an environment free of tasks that will tax his brain, and an

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Bob Adelman

"Early schooling, far from being the garden of delights its advocates claim, may actually be a damaging experience."

by Raymond S. Moore and Dennis R. Moore

equally important need is for a setting that provides warmth, continuity, and security. That normal school experience does not successfully meet these needs has been established by three different kinds of studies: those that compare early and later school entrants; those that explore important but little understood changes in the young child's brain; and those that compare the effectiveness of parents and teachers in the development of young children. All three lines of investigation point to a common conclusion: early schooling, far from being the garden of delights its advocates claim, may actually be a damaging experience.

### Too much too early

INVESTIGATORS WHO HAVE STUDIED very young children in school overwhelmingly present a grim picture. The child too often stumbles insecurely through kindergarten and the early grades. His friends who were delayed a year or so quickly catch up and pass him—and usually become more stable and highly motivated. His learning retention frequently remains lower than that of his later-starting peers, regardless of how bright he is. In other words, it is hard to escape the conclusion that early schooling is little short of crippling. A few indicative studies by well-regarded researchers give a sense of the situation:

- In an American Educational Research Association experiment with two groups of children matched by sex, age, intelligence, and home background, H. M. Davis reports: "One group began reading at the age of six, the other at the age of seven. In two years the late beginning group had caught up with the early beginning group. After the first two years, these two groups were joined in classes. At the end of their seventh school year the children who began a year later were one year ahead of the early beginners."

- In Chula Vista, California, Margaret Gott compared kindergarten children who were about

four years, nine months of age when enrolled, with those who were about five years, seven months. She found that, after six grades of schooling, the younger group achieved less well than the older group in all subjects at each grade level (except in one case where achievement was equal).


- In Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Inez King reports, fifty-four children who were under six when they started school were compared with fifty children who started after age six. Stanford Achievement Tests at the end of grade six showed a distinct difference, strongly in favor of the older group.

- Studies on how long and how well very young children retain their learning have been conducted in virtually all grades and socioeconomic levels with remarkably uniform results. B.U. Keister reported that even five-year-olds who developed enough skills to finish first-grade reading generally did not retain the learning through summer vacation. Other comparisons of reading achievements of early and late starters at third-through sixth-grade levels all found that later entrants significantly excelled those who started earlier.

- In Grosse Pointe, Michigan, Paul Mawhinney describes a study of children who were selected by psychologists because they were considered mature enough or bright enough to be admitted to kindergarten before age five. An evaluation of all those children remaining in the school system after fourteen years showed that more than one-fourth of the select group were below average or had repeated a grade.

Years ago, pioneer child researcher Arnold Gesell noted that school tasks such as reading, writing, and arithmetic "depend upon motor skills which are subject to the same laws of growth which govern creeping, walking, grasping." The awkwardness a young child may exhibit, he noted, "is often sadly overlooked by teachers and parents"—who should be as flexible in their attitudes toward the child's readiness to read as toward his readiness to walk.





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## THE DANGERS OF EARLY SCHOOLING

### Early stress can injure

A SECOND SERIES OF ARGUMENTS against early schooling emerges from the studies of neurophysiologists, psychologists, and pediatricians concerned with the delicate harmonies at work in the development of the young child's brain. These investigators are in remarkable agreement in their timing of the stages at which children are normally ready to think abstractly, to organize facts, and to sustain and retain learning without undue damage or strain.

Research on brain development indicates that important changes are constantly under way in the normal child from birth into adolescence, including the shifting of control from the emotional centers to the reasoning centers. The period at which "reason" develops, and the ability to organize facts emerges, normally comes between ages seven or eight and ten or eleven.

Numerous studies support the idea that the young child cannot meet the demands posed by schooling prior to the level of development usually achieved by age seven or eight. At Harvard, the work of Paul Yakovlev has shown that the nerve fibers between the thalamus and the cortex in a child's brain are not finished or fully insulated until after age seven. Likewise, it is only between the ages of seven and ten that the cerebral commissures (brain paths between the lobes) and the reticular formation (a primary arousing system) are fully developed.

A number of other studies have established that a child's visual and auditory systems reach maturity only gradually. This is of enormous consequence for tasks such as reading, where there are high demands for discrimination in sight and sound.

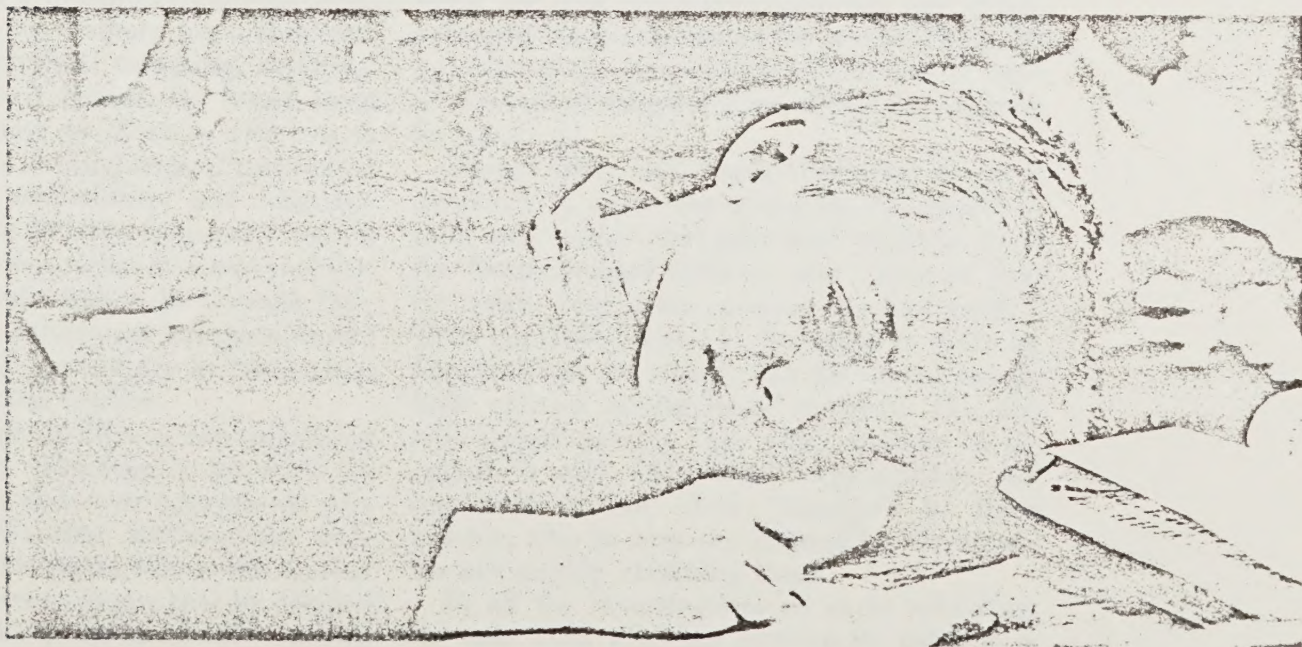
Luella Cole has observed that some children are unable to focus on objects at close range—

as required for reading—until they are seven, eight, or even older. She reports that not more than 10 per cent of five-year-olds can perceive the difference between "d" and "b" or "p" and "q". Not until children are eight, she says, is it possible to "be perfectly certain the eyes are mature enough to avoid such confusions."

Hearing presents a similar situation. Luella Cole notes: "If [a child] has normal six-year-old ears he will still be unable to distinguish consistently between the sounds of 'g' and 'k', 'm' and 'n', 'p' and 'b' or any other pair of related sounds."

Dr. Henry L. Hilgartner, a Texas ophthalmologist, offers evidence of eye damage from early schooling. Noting that the eyes of young children focus better on distant objects than on close ones, he reported that the state's record prior to 1930 was 7.7 farsighted children to every nearsighted child. After 1930, when the Texas school-entry age was lowered from seven to six, the ratio shifted to five nearsighted children for every farsighted child.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, one of the world's leading students of child development, long ago urged educators to concentrate on maximizing a child's development, not on accelerating it. He found that a child under age seven or eight relates quantity to shape and form of objects, but if the shape or form is changed, he becomes confused, assuming the quantity must also change. For instance, the four- or five-year-old seldom understands how a low, wide glass can hold as much water as a tall, narrow glass. Even after the water is poured from the tall glass into the wide one, he will usually insist that the tall one is larger and holds more. Not until he is seven or eight or older does he become a fully "reason-able" creature, able to reason abstractly instead of dealing solely with direct relationships.









## On the home front

THE THIRD, AND POSSIBLY the most important, conclusion to be drawn from research is that when a child is taken from the home for early schooling—or remains at home without loving care—he is vulnerable to mental and emotional problems that will affect his learning, motivation, and behavior. While many proponents of early schooling insist that the young child needs social contact outside the home—namely in the school—the lesson of numerous investigations is that this need ranks far behind the child's need for close parental contact. The teacher, in general, does not make a good surrogate mother.

Maternal deprivation, in the words of John Bowlby, a world authority on the subject, describes the extent to which a child does not experience “a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment.” As part of a 1951 World Health Organization study, Bowlby noted that “a child is deprived even though living at home if his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) is unable to give him the loving care small children need [or] . . . if for any reason he is removed from his mother's care.” Today, he points out that in the Western world early childhood problems commonly result from “too little mothering, or . . . [from] mothering coming from a succession of different people.” While a child is most vulnerable until age five, he can experience the effects of maternal deprivation until age eight.

In an experiment conducted in Uganda, Marcel Geber demonstrated that children who do not have continuous warm mothering are less sociable than those who do. Using standardized tests, Geber worked with babies from poor tribal families in which the mothers were child-centered, providing continual caressing, cuddling, and attention to their babies. He found these infants to be superior to Western children in sociability as well as in physiological maturation and coordination, adaptability, and language skills. While African children frequently mature earlier than Westerners, Geber also reported that babies from relatively well-to-do Uganda families, with less maternal contact but more formal training, were “much less mature in these areas than the babies of poor families.

A more personal perspective on the socializing experience of early schooling is provided by M. W. Sullivan, a well-known educational programmer. He recalls that kindergarten only caused him to wet his pants. When the teacher sent him home he was so happy that he decided to keep on wetting his pants in school—until he was sent home for the year.

On the basis of such findings, it seems clear that for a child of this age, development at home

is far more important than development in school. And if the parents' acceptance of their role is a key factor in the child's development, then it makes a great deal more sense to educate the parents to fulfill their proper role than to hire teachers to do an inadequate job of trying to substitute for them.

Traditionally, of course, school people have argued that parents simply don't care or are too ignorant or too obsessed with the desire to protect their own freedom to fulfill the needs of their children. Parents, for their part, have seldom contested this view, possibly out of feelings of uncertainty or inadequacy when confronted by the opinions of these professionals. The facts, however, as determined by a number of investigations of parental willingness to aid the development of their children, run counter to this conception. The vast majority of parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, stand ready to help their children in terms of home-education programs. While much of the justification for early childhood education has grown from the belief that children from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular will benefit, studies have repeatedly shown that the home provides resources that should not be lightly dismissed.

On the basis of several studies, Bowlby insists that “children thrive better in bad homes than in good institutions.” He goes on to observe: “It must never be forgotten . . . that even the bad parent who neglects her child is nonetheless providing much for him. . . . Except in the worst cases, she is giving him food and shelter, comforting him in distress, teaching him simple skills, and above all is providing him with that continuity of human care on which his sense of security rests.”

In Flint, Michigan, Mildred Smith found that when she took study-help materials into disadvantaged homes and asked for parental help, 90 per cent of the families responded, and of these 99 per cent of the parents asked that the program be continued.

Burton Blatt and Frank Garfunkel found it necessary to reject the operating hypothesis of their own study—that preschool might be good for disadvantaged children who “were at least two years away from entering the first grade.” They concluded that (1) the home is more influential than the school; (2) the school can do little without strong home support; (3) disadvantaged parents “are often anxious to cooperate”; and (4) school organization and requirements are often “foreign” to these parents, who in turn are blamed by the school for not readily accepting them.

In all the investigations of early schooling, the only clear evidence proving its value is in the case of special child-care needs that are *not* common to most children—and even here the home should be the center of operation when-

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ever possible. Special and early education is a benefit when it provides therapeutic help for the handicapped child—those with problems of vision, speech, hearing; or cerebral palsy, severe mental retardation, neuroses, psychoses, and advanced emotional problems. Likewise, in cases where the child may be severely deprived because his parents are mentally, physically, or emotionally unable to care for him, early schooling may provide an advantageous alternative to the home.

Yet one of the clear dangers of attempting to provide early schooling for all three- or four-year-olds is that these programs for the handicapped child, which are desperately needed, will be watered down. Sheldon White, a developmental psychologist at Harvard, fears that the early-schooling movement “will work itself into so much trouble within six years or so that it will wipe out the gains special education has made and possibly ruin the future of early-childhood education.”

Most disturbing of all, the volume of research work that stands opposed to early-childhood education appears to have made hardly a dent in the enthusiasm of its proponents. The report of the California Task Force on Early Childhood Education, for example, loftily recommends early schooling as a way to prevent future “crime, poverty, addiction, malnutrition, and violence”—without pausing to notice that some of the studies it quotes in its support actually contradict its recommendations.

It appears, indeed, that many of the problems early schooling is supposed to solve actually exist because children right now are being forced into schooling too early. Throughout the experimental work in this area there is considerable evidence that early schooling and parental deprivation together are prime contributors to childhood maladjustment, motivational loss, poor retention, deterioration of attitudes, visual handicaps, and a wide variety of other physical and behavioral problems.

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### School in the home

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**T**HE QUESTION REMAINS, of course, what is the alternative to early schooling? How are a bright child's enthusiasms and eagerness for learning to be met before he is eight years old and ready for school? The most promising practical solution emerging from current research points to home-centered educational programs.

Susan Gray and Phyllis Levenstein, among others, are now experimenting with “home schools,” the latter by means of a “Mother-Child Home Program.” In this plan, teachers visit homes at regular intervals to work with parents in assessing a child's development and suggesting appropriate ways of nurturing his growth

without taxing him. Essentially these visitors function less as traditional teachers and more as consultants or resource personnel, providing ideas and directions for the parents to use as they choose; in fact, to overcome parental fear of professional teachers, these visitors frequently refer to themselves as “toy demonstrators.”

In terms of funds required, home-teaching programs avoid the need for heavy taxation to cover capital and operating costs that, for example, the California early-school proposal is certain to bring. The California planners are projecting a cost of \$500 to \$600 per child per year. New York state experts, however, point out that such programs must be funded at the rate of at least \$1,800 per child annually, and that truly effective programs will cost “much more.”

A central spokesman for the home-school approach is Earl Schaefer, Professor of Maternal and Child Health at the University of North Carolina and former chief of early child-care research at the National Institute of Mental Health. In a recent interview, Schaefer called home-centered programs, and particularly the work of Levenstein and Gray, “the current most likely solution” to the child-development dilemma. To its credit, the Office of Child Development in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is embarking on a new project called Home Start, intended to redirect the focus of early-childhood education from the school to the home.

The home-school concept can be adapted to meet the growing national concern for children of working mothers. Neighborhood home centers could be established where the mothers (or other adults) providing care would be selected for their warmth, continuity, and dedication to the welfare of children. Where parents cannot afford the entire cost of these centers, the difference could be subsidized by the states. Traveling teachers or “toy demonstrators” on state or local payrolls could monitor these home “schools” to see that each was providing adequate care and equipment, and to coordinate them with existing social-service programs.

While the proposal is sketchy—and in any case may not provide the only answer to the country's child-care problem—it does establish a fruitful direction for exploration. After all, social policy must be a product of our best knowledge on public issues, or it runs the risk of plunging us even deeper into the problems we are attempting to escape. The clear lessons of scholarly research in the field of child development are that we must worry less about exploiting the child's intelligence and more about understanding it, and that schoolmen must realize that there is less value in attempting to substitute for the parent than in helping parents to help themselves and their children. □





